

The European Parliament and the United Nations

SUMMARY

The EU has constantly affirmed its support for multilateralism, and in particular for the United Nations (UN), with which it shares core values. Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union puts respect for the principles of the UN Charter among the guiding principles of EU action on the international scene. The EU and its Member States contribute one third to the total UN budget. Although the EU's status within the UN system varies (from full member to simple observer), the EU is the regional organisation having gained the strongest voice in the UN. The EU supports the reform agenda initiated by UN Secretary-General António Guterres.

The European Parliament is a strong supporter of rules-based multilateralism. It follows the EU's activity in the UN closely, and regularly adopts recommendations to the Council of the EU on the priorities to be pursued by the EU at the UN General Assembly, and at major multilateral conferences such as the UN climate change conference. Parliament also adopts resolutions on the implementation and delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals. It encourages cooperation between the EU – together with its Member States – and the UN, in particular on humanitarian aid, development assistance, peace operations and crisis management. As regards specific bodies and agencies, Parliament regularly reiterates its strong support for the International Criminal Court, and deplores the abuse of multilateral institutions, in particular by regimes seeking to neutralise human rights mechanisms within the UN Human Rights Council.

Parliament's relevant committees maintain relations with UN bodies and agencies. The committees invite UN representatives and experts to exchanges of views and hearings at the European Parliament, and send delegations to key meetings.



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The United Nations

In June 1945, shortly after the end of the Second World War, 51 countries signed the [charter](#) establishing the United Nations (UN), which came to existence in October 1945, after half of those countries had ratified the UN Charter. The charter's preamble affirmed the UN members' determination to achieve lasting peace through international cooperation and their 'faith in fundamental human rights, the dignity of the human person, the equality of rights of men and women and of nations large and small', and in international justice. The UN gave concrete expression to its commitment to human rights by adopting the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#) in 1948 in Paris: this non-binding document has become the undisputed universal framework for human rights.

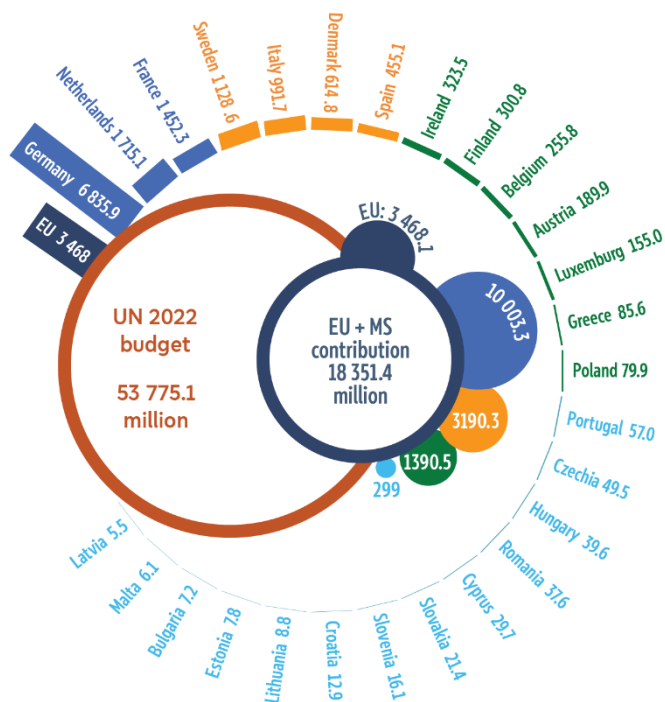
Main UN organs

- The General Assembly (UNGA) is the main deliberative, policy-making and representative organ. All 193 UN member states are represented in the UNGA, which meets in September each year in New York for its annual session and general debate, attended by many heads of state. Decisions on major questions – including the admission of new members – require a two-thirds majority. The UNGA elects a president to serve a 1-year term of office.
- The Security Council (UNSC) has primary responsibility for maintaining international peace and security. It has 15 members: five permanent members (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom (UK) and the United States (US)) and 10 non-permanent members elected every 2 years by the UNGA. Each Member has one vote; permanent members have a veto right. All UN member states are obligated to comply with UNSC decisions. The UNSC establishes the existence of a threat to peace or an act of aggression; calls on the parties to a dispute to settle it by peaceful means, recommending methods of adjustment or terms of settlement; and can impose sanctions or even authorise the use of force to maintain or restore peace and security. The UNSC Presidency rotates every month.
- The 54-member Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) serves as the central mechanism for activities of the UN and its specialised agencies in the economic, social and environmental fields. It is the UN central platform for reflection, debate and innovative thinking on sustainable development.
- The International Court of Justice (ICJ)¹ is the UN principal judicial organ. Based in The Hague (the Netherlands), it is the only one of the UN main organs not located in New York. The ICJ settles legal disputes submitted by states, and gives advisory opinions on legal questions referred by authorised UN organs and specialised agencies.
- The Secretariat is led by the Secretary-General (SG) – its Chief Administrative Officer, appointed by the UNGA on the recommendation of the Security Council for a 5-year, renewable term. Portuguese [António Guterres](#) has been the SG since 2017.

The EU and the UN

The EU has constantly affirmed its support for multilateralism, and in particular for the UN. The [geopolitical](#) orientation declared by European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen – which underpins the EU's role in the world as a promoter of freedom, democracy and the rules-based order – has added a further dimension to the EU's involvement with the UN. In terms of legal bases within the EU Treaties, Article 21 of the Treaty on European Union (TEU) puts respect for the principles of the UN Charter among the principles guiding EU action on the international scene, namely to preserve peace, prevent conflicts and strengthen international security. The EU gives preference to the UN framework to promote multilateral solutions to common problems. According to Article 220 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), the EU should establish 'all appropriate forms of cooperation with the organs of the United Nations and its specialised agencies'.

Figure 1 – EU and EU Member States' contributions to the UN system's total budget in 2022 (in US\$ million)



Data source: [UN System Financial Statistics](#). The 2022 UN budget was financed roughly a third by the EU + EU Member States (MS) (US\$18.35 million), a third by the US (US\$18.1 million), and a third by the remaining countries (US\$17.33 million, with Japan as the main contributor – US\$2.72 million – followed by the UK, China and Canada). Contributions are based on a [scale of assessment](#) decided collectively every 3 years.

Similar provisions in the TFEU oblige the EU to cooperate with all relevant international organisations with respect to specific policy areas. The UN is an organisation formally composed of states; international organisations may participate in the main UN bodies only as observers. UN agencies enjoy a higher degree of freedom in establishing their rules on the participation of non-state entities. Therefore, the EU status within the UN system varies. Well before the EU, its predecessor, the European Economic Community (EEC), was granted observer status in the UNGA in 1974. Since 1991, the EU has been a full member of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), headquartered in Rome, and since 1995 of the Geneva-based WTO (World Trade Organization, which is not a UN body but has strong ties with the UN²). Along the UNGA, where it has the status of enhanced observer since 2011,³ the EU is observer in ECOSOC and a number of UN agencies. Where the EU enjoys observer status, the President of the Council of the EU or the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security/Vice-President of the Commission (HR/VP) speak on behalf of the EU on special occasions. Otherwise, the EU delegations in New York (Ambassador: [Stavros Lambrinidis](#)) and Geneva (Ambassador: [Lotte Knudsen](#)) routinely perform this task. The Commission represents the EU in some agencies in areas of its competence (such as in the International Maritime Organization). A [European Parliament-United Nations Antenna](#) is posted to the EU delegation to the UN in New York.

The EU is the only non-state party to 49 original multilateral UN treaties and is obliged to implement their provisions in the areas of its competence. Notably, the EU has been involved in negotiations on matters such as on the adoption and implementation of subsequent agreements under the 1992 Climate Change Convention (UNFCCC) – the first global response to the climate change challenge – strongly supporting the objective of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. The EU was a

leader in drafting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), and is a frontrunner in mainstreaming the SDGs in all its policies. The EU also participated actively in the negotiations and the ongoing implementation of the [Global Compact on refugees](#), as well as in the preparation of the [Global Compact on migration](#). The EU has a long-lasting and strategic [partnership](#) with the World Health Organization (WHO), to which it is a [top contributor](#).

EU Member States coordinate most positions for UN negotiations within the Council of the EU, which annually adopts the EU priorities at the UN and the UNGA. In its [conclusions](#) of June 2024, the Council renewed its determination to promote multilateral solutions based on the UN Charter, backing the UN SG's drive for 'peace in all its dimensions'. It also expressed its commitment to working with partners to accelerate a global, just and inclusive green transition, and to accelerating efforts to deliver the UN Agenda 2030 and achieve the [SDGs](#).

The EU, the European Parliament and UN reform

Since its establishment, the UN has been subject to a number of reforms. However, the [reform agenda](#) inaugurated by UN SG António Guterres in July 2017 differs from previous ones. It focuses on management and addresses the criticisms of a lack of accountability and transparency, ineffectiveness, and the deficit in trust between the organisation and its member states in the current system. The reform agenda centres on three key areas: development, management, and peace and security. A new generation of UN country teams and a reinvigorated [Resident Coordinator](#) system are among the key proposals for development system reform.

The EU supports the UN reform process. During his [speech](#) at the UNGA in September 2023, then Council President Charles Michel called for reforming the UN Charter, including amending veto rights and enhancing UNSC representativeness. Michel proposed an institutional summit involving various regional organisations and the UN. In its June 2024 [conclusions](#) on EU priorities for the 79th UNGA of September 2024, the Council reiterated its support for a comprehensive reform of the UNSC, which should better reflect 'today's realities by strengthening the voice of underrepresented regions'. The EU supports the French–Mexican initiative recommending that UNSC permanent members voluntarily restrain from using the right of veto [in cases of mass atrocities](#), as well as the pledge of some UN member states to support the [UNSC action against genocide](#), crimes against humanity and war crimes.

The UN and regional organisations

The UN Charter, in its Chapter VIII (Articles 52–54), provides for a legal framework for sharing responsibilities in the maintenance of peace and security between the UN and regional organisations. The UNSC and UN member states are encouraged to achieve pacific settlement of local disputes through regional organisations (Chapter VI refers to this, too). The complementarity of capacities between the UN and regional organisations has been expressed in a wide and [increasing range of activities](#), including peace-making and crisis mediation, peacekeeping, and humanitarian assistance. Over the years, the SG – with support from the Department of Political and Peacebuilding Affairs (DPPA) – has convened several high-level meetings and retreats with the heads of regional organisations, to ensure coordination and mutual understanding. Together with partner organisations, the DPPA has also developed a series of regular 'desk-to-desk' dialogues with the EU, the African Union (AU) and the Organization of American States (OAS). Four [trilateral meetings](#) between the EU, the AU and the UN have taken place on the margins of the UNGA. The partners have set up a tripartite [AU–EU–UN Taskforce](#), to address the migrant and refugee situation in Libya. [Bilateral cooperation](#) is ongoing with these and other regional organisations.

In its June 2021 recommendation (see section below), the European Parliament acknowledged the potential of direct regional involvement in the UN by supporting the possibility for other organisations, such as the AU, to request a specific status as enhanced observer. MEPs recommended that the Council deploy the potential of the EU, as the most sophisticated regional organisation, to play a driving role in reviving and strengthening the UN system through multilevel multilateralism.

In its July 2022 resolution (see below), Parliament reiterated 'its strongest support' for the programme of reforms, pointing to the need for further progress, especially regarding the inclusion of women, young people and persons in a vulnerable situation, as well as on raising awareness on [intersectionality in UN structures](#). Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) pointed to the enhanced role of the 130 [UN Resident Coordinators](#) provided for by the reform of the UN development system; Parliament considers they should liaise and consult closely with EU delegations in the relevant UN member state, to pursue synergies and mutual reinforcement with the EU's thematic and geographic programmes for that country. Parliament also advocates providing a permanent seat for the EU within the UNSC, in addition to the seat already held by France.

The European Parliament, multilateralism and the UN

In its July 2022 [resolution](#) on the EU and the defence of multilateralism, the European Parliament endorsed the February 2021 [joint communication](#) by the HR/VP and the Commission on 'strengthening the EU's contribution to rules-based multilateralism'. Parliament agreed on the need for the EU to be more assertive in pursuing its interests and in advancing the universal values on which it is founded. The resolution underlined the importance for the EU to increase its capacity to be a global actor and 'speak with one voice' in order to defend multilateralism more effectively. The EU's external toolbox should include the creation of a European Diplomatic Academy and the '[New European Bauhaus](#)' launched in January 2021, a vast cooperation project combining sustainability with wellbeing, in line with the teaching of green skills as promoted in SDG 4 on inclusive and equitable quality education, and SDG 13 on climate change. Recalling that the EU is merely an observer to most of the international organisations and multilateral forums, MEPs called on Member States to gather support from third countries for such a status upgrade. Parliament supported the joint communication's statement on the adoption of [constructive abstention and decisions by qualified majority voting](#) in common foreign and security policy (CFSP) within the Council.

Recalling that EU humanitarian aid and development assistance to third countries is very often channelled [through the UN system](#), Parliament reaffirmed that the EU and the UN should work closely at headquarters level (including through EU–UN annual summits) and in the regions and countries where they deliver this assistance. MEPs invited the Commission, the European External Action Service (EEAS) and EU delegations in third countries to actively reach out and consult with the UN on UN policy and programming activities for the years 2021 to 2027 and beyond. Parliament called on the UN SG to intensify his efforts in implementing the [UN Strategy on Gender Parity](#) as an essential tool to ensure equal representation of women in the UN system. MEPs also recalled that, although the EU and its Member States are the leading financial contributors to the UN, this does not always translate into a stronger impact in key UN agency positions or in multilateral forums.

MEPs called for the structured dialogue between Parliament and the UN to be reinforced, in particular through regular meetings to exchange views between the Committee on Foreign Affairs (AFET) and other relevant committees and the heads of the EU delegations to the UN in New York and Geneva, and between these committees and the heads of mission of the EU Member States that are either permanent or rotating members of the UN Security Council. Parliament highlighted the contributions of the annual delegations from AFET and its subcommittees to the UN headquarters in New York, called for formalising some of the informal sessions between the EU and the UNSC, and encouraged the setting up of a formal association between Parliament and the UNGA.

In its 2021 annual [report](#) on human rights and democracy in the world, adopted in February 2022, Parliament reiterated its strong support for the International Criminal Court (ICC), and called on the EU and the Member States to provide adequate financial support, to enable the ICC to carry out its tasks. MEPs also called for the EU to include a specific clause on the ratification and access of the Rome Statute setting up the ICC in agreements to be concluded with third countries. The 2023 annual [report](#) adopted in February 2024 deplored totalitarian and authoritarian regimes for their abuse of multilateral institutions, in particular of the UN Human Rights Council ([HRC](#)), and their attempt to neutralise human rights mechanisms.

In its [recommendation](#) on corruption and human rights adopted in February 2022, Parliament insisted on the appointment of a UN special rapporteur on financial crime, corruption and human rights with a comprehensive mandate, including an objectives-oriented plan and a periodic evaluation of the anti-corruption measures taken by states. In a [resolution](#) adopted in January 2023, Parliament supported the establishment of a tribunal on the crime of aggression against Ukraine through the UN. With its January 2024 [resolution](#), Parliament supported the full implementation of the international standards on responsible business conduct, and promoted the [UN binding instrument on business and human rights](#), in particular on access to remedy and the protection of victims.

Parliament's involvement in UN activities

Parliament follows EU activity in the UN closely, and regularly adopts recommendations to the Council on the priorities to be pursued by the EU at the UNGA. In its June 2021 [recommendation](#) adopted in view of the 75th and 76th sessions of the UNGA, Parliament stated that the EU should strengthen its outreach activities in order to develop broader partnerships to support effective multilateralism, including seizing the opportunity of the Biden administration in the US and keeping the capacity of dialogue and partnership. MEPs recommended that the EU seek to promote further an unconditional commitment by UN members to universal values, against a backdrop of some countries promoting selective multilateralism rather than effective multilateralism. Parliament called to continue with efforts to enable the EU and its Member States to speak with one voice in the UN and other multilateral forums, and maintained that delays in the payment of assessed contribution by several Member States were unacceptable. MEPs advocated further strengthening EU–UN cooperation, to address the problem of election-related violence, including by building on the experience of Parliament's election observation missions. Parliament stressed the importance of dialogue and cooperation with the UN on peacekeeping missions; it supported all efforts to put the arms control and disarmament agenda back on the international agenda, and commended the EU's work in supporting that of the HRC. In particular, Parliament believed that the EU should support the establishment within the HRC of an independent international commission of inquiry, to investigate allegations of systemic racism and violations and abuses. MEPs also supported the UN SG's call for an affordable and accessible COVID-19 vaccine.

Parliament regularly adopts resolutions before every UN climate change conference (COP). In its [resolution](#) adopted in November 2023 on the [COP28](#) to be held in Dubai shortly afterwards, Parliament called on developed countries, including the EU and its Member States, to ensure the annual climate finance goal of US\$100 billion is met in 2023, and to work on a post-2025 goal that would go beyond this amount. Parliament reiterated its request for a dedicated EU public finance mechanism to provide adequate support in view of meeting the EU's climate finance commitments. MEPs also urged COP28 to make the [loss and damage fund](#) to support vulnerable countries operational. Moreover, Parliament called to end all direct and indirect fossil fuel subsidies, both at EU and national levels, by 2025 at the latest.

Parliament also regularly adopts resolutions before the High-Level Political Forum ([HLPF](#)), a major UN event organised under the auspices of ECOSOC, dedicated to the yearly review of progress towards the achievement of the SDGs. In its [resolution](#) adopted in June 2023, Parliament called on the Commission to present a comprehensive strategy for achieving Agenda 2030, defining:

- new governance framework, with a 'high-level Commissioner who is accountable for the implementation of the SDGs across all portfolios' and a consultative multi-stakeholder platform (gathering regional and local governments, civil society organisations and scientists);
- 'a revised set of concrete, measurable, EU-wide, time-bound targets and indicators and concrete measures for achieving them', with clear monitoring and a financial plan;
- 'a plan for the EU's SDG diplomacy and international cooperation', with the appointment of a special EU envoy for the SDGs, to promote coherent action at global level.

With its [resolution](#) of June 2023 'on lessons learnt from the Pandora Papers and other revelations', Parliament called for the EU to support the setting up of a UN framework convention on tax, with the aim of strengthening international cooperation and governance on tax and trade-related illicit financial flows. The convention had been proposed by the [African Group](#) at the UN back in 2019.

Parliament's relevant committees maintain relations with UN bodies and agencies, namely: AFET; the Subcommittee on Human Rights (DROI); the Subcommittee on Security and Defence (SEDE); and the Committee on Development (DEVE). The committees invite UN representatives and experts to exchanges of views and hearings at the European Parliament, and send delegations to key meetings. In particular, AFET, DROI and SEDE often send delegations to the UNGA in September or October of each year. [DROI](#) places special emphasis on building connections between EU institutions and international and regional human rights stakeholders, in particular with the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights (since October 2022, Austrian Volker Türk). DROI sent delegations to the UNHRC spring session and, together with DEVE and LIBE (Committee on Civil Liberties, Justice and Home Affairs); to the [UN Global Refugee Forum](#) organised by UNHCR, the UN refugee agency (together with DEVE); to the [ICC](#) in The Hague (together with LIBE and the Committee on Legal Affairs – JURI). In November 2023, DROI hosted the High-Level [Conference](#) on the 75th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

[DEVE](#), together with ENVI (Committee on the Environment, Public Health and Food Safety), focuses on the UN Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. The two committees sent delegations to attend the HLPF. [ENVI](#) regularly sends delegations to every COP. [COP29](#) is due to take place in Baku (Azerbaijan) on 11–22 November 2024. In June 2020, [ENVI](#) exchanged views with WHO Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus on the fight against COVID-19. A WHO expert joined the March 2021 [debate](#) on COVID-19 variants and the vaccines' efficacy against them. In April 2022, ENVI held an [exchange of views](#) with WHO representatives on the [EU health union](#) package and the WHO's global response to the pandemic. The Committee on Industry, Research and Energy ([ITRE](#)) is Parliament's lead committee at the UN Internet Governance Forum ([IGF](#)). The [19th IGF](#) is scheduled to take place in December 2024 in Riyadh (Saudi Arabia). The Committee on Women's Rights and Gender Equality ([FEMM](#)) regularly organises ad-hoc delegations to the annual sessions of the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) in New York – the 68th session took place in March 2024. In November 2019, together with DEVE, FEMM sent a delegation to the Nairobi summit on [ICPD25](#) – the 25th anniversary of the International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo.

Relations with the WTO

The Committee on International trade ([INTA](#)) is the leading organ on European Parliament relations with the WTO. INTA supports the WTO and its parliamentary dimension with a view to advancing towards a multilateral rules-based trade order. INTA promotes Parliament's positions ahead of the WTO Ministerial Conferences (MCs) – such as the [resolution](#) adopted in February 2024, urging the Conferences to adopt a comprehensive package on institutional reform – and sends its delegations there. Together with the Inter-Parliamentary Union, Parliament co-organised the Parliamentary Conference on the WTO ([PCWTO](#)) ahead of MC13, to strengthen democratic scrutiny of the WTO further. In November 2019, Parliament adopted a resolution on the [crisis of the WTO Appellate Body](#) (owing to the US blockage of new appointments) and its position on how to move beyond the impasse. This crisis prompted Parliament and the Council to adopt the [Enforcement Regulation](#), which entered into force in February 2021 and amended the 2014 regulation. The amendments aimed to empower the EU to impose counter-measures in situations where EU trade partners violate international trade rules and block the dispute settlement procedures included in multilateral, regional and bilateral trade agreements.

Parliament has repeatedly acknowledged the role of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees ([UNRWA](#)) in providing critical aid to ensure the day-to-day survival of 2.2 million civilians in Gaza. MEPs [rejected](#) the suspension of [funding to the UNRWA](#) by 18 [countries](#) due to allegations of 19 staff members' involvement in the Hamas terrorist attack against Israel on 7 October 2023.⁴ MEPs also [welcomed](#) the UN's move to launch an [investigation](#) without delay on these allegations. Parliament's Delegation for relations with Palestine ([DPAL](#)) maintains regular relations with the

UNRWA. In January 2024, DPAL Chair Manu Pineda expressed deep [concern](#) about some donor countries' decision to suspend their funding to the UNRWA. The Head of the Delegation for the [Office of the EU Representative](#) for West Bank and Gaza Strip, UNRWA is currently Alexandre Stutzmann.

Summit of the Future

The UN [Summit of the Future](#) is scheduled to take place in New York on 22–23 September 2024 as part of the 79th session of the UNGA, under the motto 'Multilateral solutions for a better tomorrow'. Action Days will take place on 20–21 September. The summit aims to adopt a [pact for the future](#) that would take up pressing international issues, accelerate implementation of the 2030 Agenda, and prompt reforms of various parts of the UN system.

This pact for the future will chart the way ahead in five areas: sustainable development and financing for development; international peace and security; science, technology and innovation and digital cooperation; youth and future generations; and transforming global governance. The pact will also include two annexes: the global digital compact and the declaration on future generations.

MAIN REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ The ICJ has no jurisdiction to try individuals accused of war crimes or crimes against humanity, nor does it have a prosecutor able to initiate proceedings, unlike the International Criminal Court ([ICC](#)), negotiated in the [UN framework](#) and set up under the Rome Statute (entry into force: 2002), also headquartered in The Hague.
- ² The WTO is not a UN specialised agency. However, it has maintained [strong relations with the UN](#) and its agencies since its establishment – for instance, it actively collaborates with ECOSOC. The WTO Director General participates in the Chief Executive Board, which is the organ of coordination within the UN system.
- ³ Since 2011, the EU is an observer member with 'enhanced status' at the UNGA, which allows for the EU to present common positions, make interventions, present proposals, and participate in the general debate held in September. As a simple observer, the EU can make statements, although only within the time span reserved for observers.
- ⁴ The [Council needs Parliament's consent](#) to adopt the multiannual financial framework, which includes Heading 6 on the EU external action, 'Neighbourhood and the World'.

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